

Choice Literature.

TOGGS' TEMPTATION.

"Milk-o-oh! Eee-o-oh—ee-o-oh!"

What cry is this that breaks so rudely upon the stillness of the early summer morning? The golden sunshine is supernally clear and unsullied; the young western breeze, just awaking from its night's repose, breathes upon us the purity of heaven; the dew still trembles and glitters upon the trees in the square; and the faint scent of hay, thrilling one with a longing for buttercup-fields and rose-dotted lanes, comes wandering to town with the lumbering country wains, and has not yet lost itself among the many odours of the city.

"Milk-ee-oh-o!—eee-o-oh!—yo-ho-oh!"

This time it is accompanied with the creak of wheels and the clank of cans; and a congregation of sparrows assembled beneath the eaves suddenly cease their silvery chorus, and perk their knowing little heads, and flit their saucy little tails, as they watch the movements of the big wingless bird below, whose note is so much louder than their own.

"Stand still, Polly!—sta-and still!"

It is only Tommy Toggs, the rosy-faced milk-boy. Toggs has lately been promoted—or, to give due honour where honour is due, I should have said *again* promoted; for Toggs' career ever since he first entered Simpson's employ has been an uninterrupted series of promotions. First of all he was just "Tommy," and ran about for one of Simpson's carriers, collecting empty cans, and so forth; then, like a developing tadpole, he dropped the tail of his name, and, becoming "Tom," carried a small can on his own account, and served the customers; next, we found him a mature "Thomas," with an egg-basket added to the can, and a pouch for money, Simpson having seen that he might be trusted to receive payments; finally, not more than a month before this fair summer morning of which we write, our young friend bloomed into "Toggs" complete, and was placed in charge—oh, joy and honour unspeakable!—of a gentle brown pony and a nice creamery-buttery-locking yellow milk-cart, with smart red and gold letters on the sides. And he was not yet fifteen.

If Toggs was proud of the pony and cart, I cannot tell how proud Toggs' mother was of Toggs, or how often she thanked God for giving her such a good son to be a comfort to her widowhood; and she would not let herself think it hard that the son of a master-mechanic should be nothing better than a milk-boy, knowing that a good milk-boy is as honourable in God's sight as a good merchant—or a good nobleman, for the matter of that. And when he had to turn out in the fog or frost of dark winter mornings, and she knew that thoughtless people would sometimes keep him standing in the wet or snow twice as long as they need, she only gave him an extra kiss and a bigger spoonful of sugar in his mug of hot cocoa, and sent up a wordless little prayer to Heaven that he might be kept bonny and well. She never uttered one word that might sow the seed of discontent in his brave young heart, or cloud his merry face.

As for Toggs' little sister Nellie, she thought him the grandest, strongest, cleverest, handsomest, best big brother in the world; and she knitted him a crimson scarf, every stitch herself, and a gorgeous pair of cuffs—one of which was orange-yellow, with stripes of shaded blue, and the other a chaste mingling of grass-green with terra-cotta pink; for they were made with oddments of wool that the kind "toy-shop lady" had sent over to Nellie to amuse the child in one of her bad times.

Poor little Nellie often had bad times. She was subject to swelling of her glands, which kept her weak and pale and small. Sometimes the painful tumours had necessitated lancing, and several ugly scars were left on her soft little neck. But if you had ventured to suggest that Nellie was anything but a beauty—a real fairy, in fact—in Tom's hearing, he would have looked as if he wanted to knock you down! A regular "mutual admiration society" were Mrs. Toggs and her two children. After all, there was something very winning in the child's delicate face; and everyone allowed that her large brown eyes, shining with intelligence and shaded by long black lashes, were most lovely.

It was of Nellie chiefly that Toggs was thinking on this fresh June morning; and the hay-waggon had set his thoughts going.

"That's what she wants!" he said to himself. "(Milk-o-oh!—yo-oh-oh!) I'd give something to see her rolling in the hay-fields along with the other little 'uns. Why, the very smell of it is enough to make you dance. I feel 'most as if I could fly! Not to speak of the daisies and buttercups and 'toddy' little yellow chickens running about as she's so fond of, and the eggs for her breakfast, and (Milk, ee-o-oh—ee-yo-oh!) nothing to do all day but run about and play and pick the flowers! My! wouldn't she come back fat! But fun's won't stretch to it; so it's no use thinking. Come on, Polly!"

And the docile pony, who had soon grown to know Toggs' kindly voice moved obediently to the next stopping-place.

Some may wonder how it happened that, with so many agencies at work for giving ailing children country holidays, little Nellie Toggs longed for the green fields in vain. I fear I must confess that Mrs. Toggs, estimable woman though she was, had a wee bit too much pride; "proper pride," of course, but too much of it. She continually hoped that she might be able to save enough to send or take Nellie away herself, though unforeseen expenses had again and again prematurely swallowed up the little slow growing hoard. Nevertheless, she still waited and hoped, and comforted Nellie with prospects for "someday," and refrained from putting the child forward as a candidate for the bounty of either church or school.

"There are others worse off than we are," she would say to Tom when he ventured to argue the point, "and children more weakly than Nellie. It would be downright robbery to take for nothing what we are able to pay for; and when this and that is settled, I believe we shall have a trifle to spend on a holiday, and then an outing Nellie shall certainly have."

"Yo-oh-ee-o-oh!" and the neat yellow cart with its silvery-shining cans stopped at Dr. Marwood's door. But the family were not early risers, and the milk was to be left in a corner of the front portico.

Turning away, Toggs' eye was caught by something gleaming in the neighbourhood of the key-hole, which was partly concealed by a laurel growing in an ornamental pot.

It was a bunch of keys on a ring, hanging from the one that had been left inserted in the lock of the door.

His first impulse was to pull at the bell and give information of his discovery. But there immediately appeared before his mental gaze the vision of a printed bill on which the words "Lost—Reward" were very conspicuous; and almost at the same moment he remembered finding a purse in a customer's front garden one day, and handing it in, to receive a "thank you" only for his honesty.

"The knowledge that you have done right, and as God would have you do, was enough," his mother told him; but Tom couldn't get rid of a lurking suspicion that if he had taken care of his find till it was advertised for, the transaction, from a worldly point of view, might have been more profitable.

"Lost—Reward! Five Shillings Reward! Ten Shillings Reward!" How the big black letters dazzled Toggs' imagination! He even fancied he had somewhere seen "One Pound Reward" offered for a missing bunch of valuable keys. Then Nellie's white face and wistful brown eyes came before him, and he heard her repeat the question of a few days before: "Tommy, does the milkman in the country take the cow round in his cart instead of the big can?"

"Bless her! she shall know for herself," thought Toggs. "I'm in luck's way, and it would be a wicked shame not to let her have the benefit of it."

So he quietly slipped the keys in his pocket, and silently turned away. The pony followed him without being called and he didn't sing "Milk-oh!" again until he reached the other end of the long street.

"It wasn't like stealing—not a bit like it," Toggs found it necessary to assure himself several times in the course of the morning. He was only going to "take care" of the keys for a little while, and, anyhow, he should give them up in a day or two, whether any reward were offered or not. The probability of enquiries being then made as to when and where he found them did not occur to him.

The doctor and his family were seated at breakfast in their pleasant morning-room. The window was open, and the breeze gently swayed the soft muslin curtains, and wafted in the refreshing odour that followed the damp brown trail of a water-cart.

"You are quiet this morning, Emma," observed the doctor when his sister, Mrs. Wells, who had sat for some minutes lost in contemplation, gazing up at the sunlit lime leaves trembling in vivid green against the clear azure sky; "are you not well?"

"Yes, quite well, thank you, Geoffrey; but I was thinking of a dream I had last night—or, rather, this morning, just before I woke. It has all gone from me now, but I know the central figure was that poor man Toggs—you remember?—who came to fix our electric bells at Clevedon."

"That was always a sore subject with you, Emma."

"Yes, and always will be," returned the lady. "The evidence against him certainly looked strong, but we had no right to judge him so hastily."

"It is sad that he should have died without knowing that the ring was found, and his character cleared," said the doctor's wife.

"I wonder if the suspicion in any way hastened his death!" sighed Mrs. Wells. "I would so like to know, too, what became of his poor wife and children, a nice, superior sort of person she was. Oh, there goes the surgery bell, Geoffrey! You have not had a single meal in peace since I have been here."

"Could you see who it was?" asked Mrs. Marwood, as the doctor bustled out of the room.

"A woman leading a little girl passed the window a moment before," replied her companion; "and the child was holding something up to her eyes."

The doctor's wife shuddered. "A great many surgical cases are brought to Geoffrey," she said; "he is known to be so clever, and the hospital is so far off. But any accident to the eyes is terrible!"

A few minutes later Dr. Marwood came rushing back like a whirlwind.

"My keys! Emma—Julia—have you seen anything of my keys?" he distractedly cried. "I've got a child here with something run into her eye, and my instruments are all locked up!"

Full of sympathy both for the doctor and his unfortunate little patient, the ladies at once commenced a vigorous search. But, as Mrs. Marwood said, "If the doctor himself cannot tell where they are, I fear we are not likely to be able to help him. Geoffrey always carries all his keys about with him on one bunch."

"I fear, too," said Mrs. Wells, "that the case may be urgent!"

"Urgent, yes!" cried the doctor, who was hurrying from room to room, half beside himself with anxiety. "Every moment is of value. The child's sight for life may depend upon it.—Ah, I have it! They are in the street door. I remember now! That's where they must be."

And he darted away again.

"He was called to a patient very early this morning," said Mrs. Marwood to her sister-in-law. "I suppose he thinks he may have inadvertently left the latchkey, which is with all the others, in the lock when he returned."

"It is to be hoped that no dishonest person has caught sight of them!" exclaimed Mrs. Wells. But while she was speaking the doctor came back with the disappointing news that the keys were not to be found.

"She must go to the hospital at once," he said referring to the poor little sufferer. "Dear, dear! that ever this should have happened! God grant that the eye may not be lost through it—I should never forgive myself! But I am sorely afraid."

"Come, come, my love, be a woman and bear it!" they heard the mother say, as she took her child away. "We must get to the hospital somehow, you know. Come, let's make haste, dearie, and the pain will the sooner be better."

"Poor dear!" murmured Mrs. Marwood. "How dreadful to have to send her away like that! But what will Geoffrey do? If the keys really were left in the door, I fear somebody must have stolen them!"

At twelve o'clock Toggs went home to his dinner. His step was not so brisk as usual, though he kept telling him-

self that he had done no harm, and that the keys jingling in his pocket represented a gain of ten shillings or even a pound towards Nellie's holiday in the country. How pleased she would be!—how her beautiful eyes would shine when he told her! But he doubted if he should exactly like to confess where the keys were found, and resolved to say nothing about the matter until the reward was secure.

He trudged up the stairs to his mother's lodgings at the top, but no Nellie came dancing out to meet him. That was "queer," he thought. Yet still "queerer" was it to go in at the half-open door and find the room empty!

Empty, and in a state of confusion! The breakfast cups stood unwashed upon the table, and the bread and butter beside them. An uneaten slice in Nellie's plate, and some tea left in his mother's cup, suggested a sudden interruption of the meal. But where were they gone?

While Tom stood stock-still, gazing in perplexity and dismay, he heard, to his relief, his mother's footstep on the stairs.

"Oh, my dear!" she panted, as she reached the top. "I was afraid you'd be in before I could get back. I've only just been out to get the dinner, Tom. I've been so hindered, going to the hospital with Nellie."

"Nellie! What's happened to her, then?"

"Why, my dear, it was rather a serious accident," replied Mrs. Toggs, bustling round meanwhile to get her hungry boy something to eat. "She was sitting at breakfast, and was amusing herself by twirling a few glass beads at the end of a piece of cotton, when they struck against the edge of her plate, and one of the beads was smashed, and somehow—I suppose, because of the twirling—a tiny splinter of the glass flew in her eye."

"Oh, mother!" gasped Tom, turning quite pale. "Poor little chicken! Is it very bad? Where is she?"

"So bad that when I took her to the hospital they would not let her come away. I was obliged to leave her there."

"Couldn't they get it out, then—the bit of glass?"

"She went under an operation, poor dear, and the doctor says he believes it is all removed. But I hope and trust—! But there, Tom, I don't want to make you miserable. The doctors are wonderfully clever, and God is good."

"She won't—she won't lose her sight, will she, mother?" asked Tom, his appetite completely taken away by this direful news.

"We must pray not, my dear; we must pray! But anything to do with the eyes is so dreadful."

"I s'pose she didn't like you coming away without her?" said Tom.

"No, poor lamb! of course not. But she will have every kindness there. Oh, Tom, you never saw such a beautiful place!—and I knew it was for her good."

Mrs. Toggs did not tell Tom of the sad delay caused by going first to Dr. Marwood. She thought it would only worry him the more.

Very heavy was Tom's heart, and very unlike his usually rollicking shout was his spiritless "Milk-oh!" that afternoon. What good would be the reward he hoped for if Nellie could not go in the country, or if going—worse still!—she could not see? It was only for her sake he wanted it, and now—!

Toggs could not have described how he felt, but he gradually became overcome with the conviction that there was going to be no blessing on what he had done for Nellie that day.

"I'd better take 'em back," he thought, as he again neared the doctor's house, "and chance getting anything. I reckon it wasn't quite fair and square. I don't think mother would have liked it if she knew, and mother's mostly in the right. It wasn't doing as I'd be done by, I'll own. When I lose anything, and anybody else finds it, I want 'em to give it up to me, sharp, sure enough, and I s'pect other folks feel the same. Milk-o-oh-ee-o-oh-ee-o-oh!"

And having made this good resolution, Toggs' voice was once more clear as a bell.

"Here, give these to the master, will you?" he said, when the doctor's servant appeared at the area with her jug. "I found them sticking in the door, and I guess they're his."

"Master's keys!" exclaimed Mary. "When did you find them?"

"S mornin', first thing," confessed Toggs, who never told a lie.

"This morning! Oh, why didn't you knock at the door with them at once?" cried the girl. "Master has been in such a way! And a poor child came here at breakfast-time who's likely to lose the sight of her eye because he couldn't attend to her, through all his things being locked up!"

"What child?" demanded Toggs, aghast.

"I don't know! I only heard that she'd got a bit of glass or something in her eye. You'd no right to go and keep master's keys all day, like this! If you'd given them in at once, as you ought, you'd very likely have got something for your trouble. You'll get nothing now!"

So saying, the servant slammed the door, and left poor Toggs standing on the steps, quite overcome with the dreadfulness of the revelation.

He had wanted to do Nellie good, and because he took a crooked way about it, he had perhaps caused her a lifelong injury! He quite believed himself to be the most wretched boy in London that sunshiny day.

If Toggs had indulged any hope that the poor little sufferer spoken of might not after all have been his sister, it was dispelled by his mother's corroboration of Mary's tale, when he told her the whole truth at night.

"What shall I do, mother?" he said, with an insuppressible sob. "If Nellie loses the sight of her eye all through me, I shall—I shall—I don't know what I shan't do!" and he fairly broke down at the thought.

"We can only pray to God, my boy, as I said before," answered the widow, "and hope in His great mercy."

The following afternoon, while Toggs was out on his round, something happened. A lady—a real lady, not a visiting-lady, nor yet a tract-lady, the occupant of the parlours confided to her of the first floor—came to see Mrs. Toggs, and stayed quite a long while.

This is a fragment of their conversation:—

"Directly I heard that the milk-boy had given the keys back, and that Mary thought his name was Tubbs or Noggs, or something like that, it occurred to me that he might be some connection of my poor friend Toggs. I have so often longed to be able to let you know that your husband's character was cleared at last, and—and," here the lady